

“Someone like me can be successful, too!”

Why we need more LGBT role models in the workplace

Luisa Liekefett (Braunschweig University of Technology, Germany)

Jojanneke van der Toorn (Leiden University/ Utrecht University, The Netherlands)



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Role models are people who others can look up to and who can provide a source of inspiration, motivation and vicarious learning. But how can role models best be utilised in order to help lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people* achieve equality in the workplace?

LGBT employees who want to advance in their careers are often faced with a number of difficulties, including prejudice, unequal pay, lack of anti-discrimination policies, and workplace harassment. Increasing visibility of LGBT leaders who are openly “out” at work can be a first start in providing newcomers with encouraging role models. Understanding the ways in which role models can inspire and impact others is a crucial step in advancing an inclusive workplace.

How can role models help LGBTs?

Individuals learn from watching others. Witnessing the success of others empowers people to believe they can similarly succeed, encouraging them to make greater efforts and be more persistent in the face of difficulties. Such empowerment may be particularly valuable for minority employees such as LGBTs. Having historically faced discrimination and stigma, members of minority groups often believe in themselves less, earn less, and face poorer job prospects. Having a role model can have powerful consequences: it has been associated with a greater sense of self-esteem, better performance at school, improved leadership competence for women and fewer risky behaviours among adolescents.

For role models to be effective, they need to be perceived as similar to oneself. Women are more inspired by outstanding female role models, ethnic minorities by same-race role models, and LGBT students by role models of the same sexual orientation. Such role models may offer guidance specific to the challenges of being a minority in the workplace, and thus could inspire and advance LGBT employees in ways that heterosexual and/or cis-gender role models may not be able to.

What are specific challenges for LGBTs?

But role models can be especially elusive for LGBT employees. Not only are LGBTs severely underrepresented in public or high power positions, but they often hide their LGBT identity due to various challenges such as negative coworker reactions and discrimination. Due to this scarcity, LGBTs are more likely to find role models among media and public figures. For example, Ellen DeGeneres’s publicised coming out on

television made young LGBTs feel that it was okay to be gay, and inspired pride in their identity.

But the positive influence of distant figures is limited: Role modeling seems to be most effective within personal relationships, in which concern and care can be expressed. Inaccessible role models might even increase psychological distress by serving as a constant reminder of the absence of accessible others who support and accept you for who you are. Thus, LGBT celebrities cannot replace actual, real-life mentors and support figures.

How can we put these insights into practice?

Increasing access to role models may thus be particularly valuable for LGBTs and members of other minority groups. This does not mean, however, that everyone should be expected to act as an ambassador for how they identify, as some people are more comfortable in that role than others. Also, one does not decide to be a role model but is viewed as such by others.

Nevertheless, opportunities for role model identification should be increased through specialised interventions at schools, universities and workplaces, featuring a diverse range of professionals. This could be achieved through networking events or internships in businesses that value diversity and inclusion as a part of their corporate identity. Moreover, businesses should educate their employees about the influence of role models and about diversity and inclusion more broadly. Lastly, LGBT professionals should be encouraged to take an active and visible role in the company, in order to function as role models for future generations.

The CEO who is “out” can have a powerful symbolic function, but role models are important at all layers of the organisation to offer LGBTs similar and accessible sources of mentoring and support. In order to achieve this goal, an environment of inclusion is key: people are much more likely to step up as role models if they feel included, safe and accepted for who they are.

*Although LGBT is the abbreviation of a limited number of categories, we use it in this article because most social psychological research in this area has been done among or about people who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual and/or transgender. However, it is important to note that sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) are much more diverse than these four letters suggest.

Further reading

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